



Funny Boy: Concluding Lecture

Questions of “Other” and the myth of
Queerness



“The past is another country. They do things differently there.”

---L.P. Hartley



'Queer amnesia' --Shyam Selvadurai's Funny Boy comes to gay voices.

These voices are either colonized by heterosexual narratives or they are persecuted as something unnatural and insane.

Thus, one can claim that Selvadurai attempts to remember the past as it was without the interpolation of heterosexual narratives and writers.

The novel without considering past as a different country, as indicated in Hartley's statement, that is the epigraph of this essay, tries to rewrite it.

Laws in Sri Lanka oppress queers with article 365 of the Sri Lankan Penal Code:

"Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with imprisonment that may extend to ten years."

And in 365A, which has been amended in 1995 so that lesbians can also be brought under the jurisdiction of the law:

"Any person who, in public or private, commits, or is a party to the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any person of any act of gross indecency with another person, shall be guilty of an offence."



An instance of ordeal, a queer has to bear in Sri Lanka can be measured from the contents of a letter by P. Alles written on August 20, 1999 and published in a Sri Lankan newspaper that advocated the release of queer offenders.

When requested by a gay activist Sherman De Rose to take action against the perpetrator for igniting violence towards women, the Sri Lankan Press Council dismissed the complaint and fined Sherman Rs 2100 for promoting sadism (Sri).

Like the gays in Sri Lanka, Arjie becomes a sacrificial victim of old oppressive laws promoting heterosexuality, and debasing homosexuality.

Mockery of homosexuality becomes an unavoidable part of heterosexual existence as presented by Selvadurai in the novel when the family found Arjie in the sari:

Cyril Uncle cried out jovially to my father, “looks like you have a funny one here.”
(Selvadurai 14)



Selvadurai's technique in this "Queer" discourse:

Selvadurai uses two significant narrative strategies – deployment of an innocent first person protagonist-narrator and a deliberate dovetailing of the political and personal to emphasize the diversity in the queer discourse.

These strategies are handpicked by him to underline the diversity of narratives and simultaneously they are also used to present the perspective of the subaltern side.

With these strategies, Selvadurai succeeds in accomplishing the feat of making 'pigs fly.'

Selvadurai presents to the audience, a first person reliable narrator who piece by piece unravels the narrative to the readers and in the course of his narration which intersperses with his personal growth, highlights the growth of the nation as the cloud of nationalism looms large.

Selvadurai rather than supporting the idea of nationalism challenges it and tells us how nationalism creates an invisible code of conduct and anything that falls out of that code becomes unnatural: One can see that the novel is less of a bildungsroman than a historical novel.

Transgressing the heterosexual debates of Art for Art's sake, a close analysis of the narrative strategies can show that literature for gay writers is a conduit for social change intermingled with their lived experiences.

The innocent 'subjective' gaze of the child narrator is utilized by the writer to analyze two postcolonial ideas: the idea of nationalism, and the idea of gay community.



Selvadurai questions the idea of nationalism, which is based on linguistic and heteronormative lines by reconfiguring the definition of home.

Home, which is considered as a space where nationalist ideas are generally implemented has become a place of defiance in Selvadurai's novel.

Within a queer diasporic imaginary, the lost homeland is represented not by the pure and self-sacrificing wife and mother but rather by a queer boy in a sari.

This project of reterritorializing national space, and the uses of drag in such a project, are explicitly articulated.



Conclusion:

Since the title of the book does not have a definite article “the,” one can say that perhaps Selvadurai writes to present social conditions of all so-called ‘funny’ boys rather than only one i.e. Arjie.

The novel was primarily positioned as a gay text, and responses ranged from one writer’s enraged evaluation of the novel as filth to a national debate on the need to repeal the anti-sodomy law after the Sri Lankan President read it.

Thus, the novel lays down the responsibilities of a gay writer towards his own sexuality.



Thank You.

For questions mail me
@roy91.Swapna@gmail.com

